

# Off the Couch with Dr. Katz

Even in the face of multiple sclerosis, Emmy-Award winning comedian Jonathan Katz is as animated as ever.

BY SUSANNAH GORA

Of course, he's kidding—his work raising MS awareness means plenty to him. In fact, he's a Goodwill Ambassador for the National MS Society. But over the course of a day spent together (in which, if you're lucky, Katz will make you chicken for lunch and let you play with his dog Bongo), the entertainer will jump from sidesplitting jokes to solemn accounts of living with MS and then back to comedy again. It's his way of coping with a serious disease—and for Katz, laughter is definitely the best medicine.

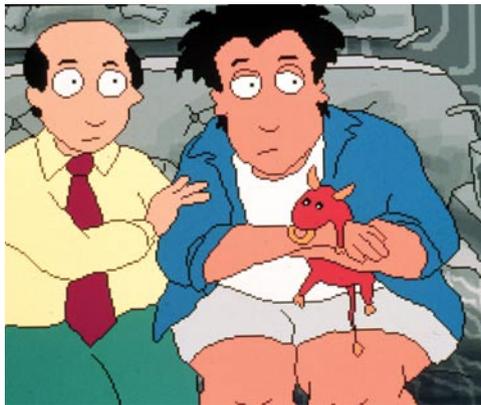
**NEUROLOGY NOW:** So Jonathan, you've been well known for your brilliantly quirky style of comedy ever since you made a splash with the Comedy Central series that you starred in and co-created. On *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist*, you provided the inspiration for—and voice of—an animated psychiatrist. Now, you're known not just as a comedian, but also as a comedian with MS. You were first diagnosed in 1997... what was that like for you?

**JONATHAN KATZ:** When your doctor is first examining whether you have MS, two things need to be ruled out: Lyme

Upon walking into the sunny Newton, Massachusetts home of comedian Jonathan Katz, you're greeted—not surprisingly—by a joke. Displayed on his living room table are his Emmy Award (for *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist*, his hit animated series that ran on Comedy Central from 1995-2000) and a National Multiple Sclerosis Society “Gift of Laughter” award. Earnestly, with the sincerest of looks on his face, Katz asks you: “Which of these awards do you think means the most to me?” Delicately, you guess the multiple sclerosis (MS) award.

“Come on! I mean, we’re talking about an Emmy here!”

“I honestly had no idea *Dr. Katz* would appeal to anybody but my friends and family. And I wasn’t sure about my family.”



disease, and Lemon-Lyme disease. No, seriously, I talk about MS with such frankness, and maybe that’s because for several years I was in the closet about having the disease.

**NN:** It’s clear that the gift of humor helps enormously in a situation like this.

**JK:** Yes, and I have another idea that could prove very helpful. Multiple sclerosis is virtually unknown in areas near the equator. Nobody knows why. But I did some math, and by simply raising the equator as little as 500 miles, we could greatly reduce the number of people with the disease.

**NN:** Were you always funny? Growing up in New York City, were you a humorous kid?

**JK:** People ask if I was the class clown, and I say no, I was the blackboard monitor. The more thoughtful answer is, when I was a young boy, I used to record the things that every young boy finds funny, and when I got a little older I started recording sketches from *Mad Magazine* with my cousin, stuff like that.

**NN:** And in a very Forrest Gump-esque moment of your life, you were actually a ping-pong champion in high school?

**JK:** Yes, at the end of the 1960’s, there was a team of ping-pong players going to China in what they called Ping-Pong diplomacy. And I had to choose between that and going to college, which I did, and in retrospect I made the right choice. Goddard College is where I met my best friend, [playwright and filmmaker] David Mamet.

**NN:** Seriously?

**JK:** Seriously. We were best friends there, and we remain best friends. Ah Goddard... those were a great 10 years. Then I graduated, and my father said I had to learn a trade, and here were my choices: plumbing, or piano tuning. And I went with piano tuning. The only job I ever had tuning pianos was for David Mamet’s aunt in the suburbs.

**NN:** How did you go from piano-tuning to stand-up?

**JK:** I discovered that I loved to sing. As a performer, when I sang, people talked, but when I talked, people listened. So I started talking more and singing less. And I sort of segued into being a cabaret performer and then a standup comedian.

**NN:** And then in the ’80’s and early ’90’s, your stand-up act was very popular nationwide. Tell us about that time in your life.

**JK:** It was very exciting to get paid to do comedy. Getting

your first laugh is amazing. Getting your first job is amazing. And then, once I did the Letterman show, I had some kind of national recognizability. So then it was Atlantic City, and Vegas casinos, and sometimes Ray Romano and I would work together for a week.

**NN:** The moment when you became known and beloved to people everywhere came in the mid-’90’s,

with *Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist*. The show became a cult hit on Comedy Central, you won an Emmy, and Dr.Katz mania took over. Celebs like Winona Ryder were huge fans and begged for cameo appearances. Was that a dream come true for you, or was it kind of strange?

**JK:** It was both. I honestly had no idea the show would appeal to anybody but my friends and family. And I wasn’t sure about my family.

**NN:** Then, right when all of these amazing professional things were happening for you, you started getting some strange sensations and were eventually diagnosed with MS.

What were your early symptoms?

**JK:** You ever wake up in the morning with that sticky stuff in your eyes? That’s MS. No, the straight answer is, there is a classic MS presentation called the Lhermitte presentation. When you put your chin to your chest, you feel something electric going up your leg. It doesn’t always mean you have MS: In my case, I was standing in water while drying my hair. Actually, in 1996 I called my doctor in Boston because it was the first time I had ever felt that sensation, and it scared me. At the time I was working on a show called *Ink*, with Ted Danson. My doctor said ‘I want you to see a neurologist when you get back to Boston,’ which I did.

**NN:** What did that first neurologist tell you?

**JK:** He said “No more meat, no more salt, no more alcohol.” I said, “What about sex?” He said, “I’m seeing someone.”

**NN:** People with MS often say that once they’ve been diagnosed, strange sensations from their past start making sense.

**JK:** For me, it was a race that I had been running in with my brother. I’d always been a very fast runner, but in this one race, I fell down, and that seemed strange. That might have been an early sign. After I got diagnosed, I started giving talks to people about living with MS. And people [with more advanced MS] would come up to me afterwards, and it was like looking into my future. But I do enjoy speaking to these audiences. I’ve been telling other comedians that the easiest gig I



“You know, I am very competitive with other people in show business who have MS. I said to my friend **Teri Garr**, “I’m going to make you wish you had lupus.”

ever had was following not one, but two neurologists.

**NN:** Has there been any silver lining to having MS?

**JK:** In some ways, oddly enough, I needed to slow down. And I’m not glad that I have MS, but it has become my hook as a comedian.

**NN:** You’re married, with two daughters...

**JK:** Yes. My wife and I have been married for 25 years, and we recently renewed our vows—of celibacy.

**NN:** What has the impact of your MS been like on your family?

**JK:** This is going to sound like a cliché, but they say, it’s not just me, it’s my family that has MS. And it is something that we’re all going through, especially those of us who are still living here in this house. My daughter Julia got to know me as a healthy young man before she went to college, so she has seen less of it.

**NN:** I assume you didn’t know much about the disease beforehand.

**JK:** No, I didn’t have a clue what it meant. I thought it was a stage I was going through.

And when someone talks about a possible cure, it’s a lot more exciting than talking about the cause, because nobody knows what causes it.

**NN:** You seem to be doing great. I know you use a scooter sometimes to help conserve your energy...What other kind of

lifestyle changes help alleviate your symptoms?

**JK:** I do physical therapy twice a week, a lot of stretching. Most of it is on my own, but sometimes I work with a physical therapist. And I do a lot of body strengthening. You know, I am very competitive with other people in show business who have MS. I said to my friend Teri Garr, “I’m gonna make you wish you had lupus.”

**NN:** Do you miss anything about your life before being diagnosed?

**JK:** My wife and I were recently at a wedding and everybody was dancing, and I was feeling sorry for myself because I was just sitting down. But then my wife came up to me and reminded me that I never liked dancing.

**NN:** So how do you handle having an exciting, busy career and having MS?

**JK:** You pace yourself. We used to have three kids, now we’re down to two. No, I take an MS drug, and there are drugs that slow down the progression of the illness. But performing—it’s a lot. If I’m doing a live show, it lasts an hour and a half.

**NN:** The decision to go public with your MS must have been a tough one. Why did you decide to do it?

**JK:** I was doing a TV show with Bob Saget and I was living in L.A. I spent so much time and energy pretending to be healthier than I was, and it was exhausting.

**NN:** I know you talk about MS a lot in your standup routines nowadays. Are there any other ways in which MS works itself into your career?

**JK:** I recently did a film, *Are We Done Yet*, a comedy starring Ice Cube. In that movie, I go to Ice Cube’s house in a scooter, with my wife in the sidecar.

**NN:** That must have been a fun movie to make. What other projects are you working on?

**JK:** I’m working on a book with my friend Bill Braudis called *501 Things You Don’t Want to Say Out Loud*, and a boxed set of *Dr. Katz* DVDs will come out in the fall.

**NN:** It seems like you’ve figured out a way to manage your MS pretty well, and your sense of humor probably has a lot to do with that.

**JK:** You know, life goes on with this disease. I use comedy to cope. In fact, I teach a course called ‘Coping With Comedians Who Use Comedy to Cope.’ NN

*Susannah Gora’s work has appeared in magazines such as Elle, Premiere, and Woman’s Day.*